

The students of the University of Cincinnati College of Medicine have had the honor to work in and around Cincinnati by interacting with community organizations. Having worked with our community partner for the past year and a half, we wish to communicate how they have been impacted by COVID-19. Our community partner, Mercy Neighborhood Ministries (MNM), focuses their efforts in aiding the low income and disadvantaged elderly of the Walnut Hills community by providing access to home care services, nutrition, crisis assistance, social support, and educational opportunities. In recent months, they have significantly modified their operations to continue to serve their clients, the vulnerable elderly whose lives have been harmed by COVID-19.

One of MNM's most popular services is their food pantry. The original pantry layout allowed clients to walk through aisles and select groceries as they would in a store. The pantry also included important information for seniors regarding their food options, such as highlighting low-sodium alternatives and low glycemic index foods which is useful for clients managing hypertension and diabetes, respectively. This layout was valuable; giving people greater choices in selecting their food has been shown to reduce both the stigma associated with receiving food from a pantry and waste associated with pre-packaged boxes.¹ Client choice food pantry models have also been shown to potentially increase the self-efficacy of those who utilize such resources.² In light of the new social distancing guidelines, MNM has modified their food assistance service to provide prepared food bags at the door and grocery delivery, prepared by volunteers, every two weeks. The pantry had also focused on providing access to fresh produce, supported by donations from local grocery chains and the community garden. These supply lines have been curtailed, so while MNM has been able to provide adequate food to their clients, they are concerned about the nutritional consequences of limited produce.

MNM suspended all in-person events in accordance with distancing guidelines. These included Creative Aging Events where seniors were able to enjoy a meal together and watch a performer or play bingo. Another event is Wellness Days where senior clients eat and socialize with one another as they wait to shop the food pantry and have a nurse to speak with to get their blood pressure checked. Such events are crucial to addressing the social determinants of health—social isolation and food insecurity—that greatly impact the quality of life of older adults in Walnut Hills. In response to the increased social isolation seen in Walnut Hills as a result of an appropriate community response to the pandemic, MNM has increased their attempts to remotely check on community members by calling and emailing individuals who are in need of social support. It should also be noted that there are existing home care aides who have continued caring for those who need them the most; they provide essential living assistance and now double as a reprieve from isolation. The nursing staff calls the home care clients routinely several times each week and does wellness checks on them. In addition, United Way, a nonprofit organization with a global presence, has partnered with MNM to provide handwritten notes to community members experiencing increased social isolation.³

One of the most critical alterations to MNM operations is their source of revenue. Prior to the pandemic, MNM held in-person fundraisers that provided crucial financial support for their organization. Historically, these fundraisers have contributed over \$100,000 or 10% of the entire MNM budget.⁵ Needless to say, these types of events are no longer feasible, and their absence poses a considerable financial challenge. Consequently, MNM has become considerably more reliant on individual and institutional donations to finance their payroll, food pantry, and new operational costs related to the pandemic, such as the aforementioned grocery delivery, PPE and increased sanitation protocols.

The COVID-19 pandemic has impacted MNM in nearly all aspects of their operations. We hope this summary can shed light on the obstacles that the COVID-19 pandemic has imposed on MNM's fight to preserve the wellbeing of the elderly in Walnut Hills. We will now turn the discussion towards how the seniors served by MNM have been affected by COVID-19.

The community MNM serves is particularly sensitive to the detrimental effects of COVID-19. Much of our knowledge of the older adults' circumstances come from our meeting with the directors at MNM, Mary Pat Raupach and Jenny Rye, and the information they gathered from phone call check-ups and home care aids. Anecdotal trends found community members reluctant to seek medical care for fear of COVID-19 exposure (Mary Pat Raupach and Jenny Rye, personal communication, Aug 28, 2020). This may be creating difficulties for seniors to manage common chronic medical conditions (e.g. hypertension, diabetes, arthritis, etc.), thus placing them at higher risk for morbidity. One study examining the impacts of COVID-19 on chronic pain management found significant challenges and gaps in care with the closure of many outpatient centers.⁶ They propose that telemedicine, medical services provided through electronic audio-visual services/apps, may be a useful alternative.⁶ However, our population faces sizeable barriers, which we will discuss later, to accessing such a service.

We have also found that if a community member is willing to go into the clinic, transportation remains a major concern for this population due to the risk of contracting an infection. Many do not have personal vehicles and can only walk or take public transportation. However, walking long distances is difficult for those with arthritis or heart disease, and the Cincinnati Metro has currently suspended all non-essential employee travel.⁷ Those who are savvy enough to call an Uber or Lift need to be wary of sick contacts, as one community member discovered their driver to be COVID-positive (Mary Pat Raupach and Jenny Rye, personal communication, Aug 28, 2020). In fear of increased exposure, clients have also been refusing visits from newly hired home care aides or those they do not recognize. Transportation is also an important factor in accessing healthy foods. There are no easily accessible grocery stores in the Walnut Hills area, only drug stores or gas stations. This is especially detrimental as one study recognizes that unhealthy diets may increase the risk of contracting COVID and hinder recovery by way of an impaired immune system related to type II diabetes and obesity.⁶ The impact of COVID-19 is detrimental to physical health, but we must also consider its effect on mental health especially in older adults.

Increased isolation is of particular concern in an aging population because of their natural predisposition, either through limited mobility, increased distance from friends, or the loss of loved ones. As stated prior, socialization events hosted at MNM (Wellness Days and Creative Aging events) brought seniors together as a community. Losing these events exacerbates the difficulties older persons face in connecting with one another. These conditions in the time of COVID make depression more likely and increases the risk for suicide especially in those with mental illness.⁸ Many members of younger generations, who grew up with easier access to technology, take their ability to use popular services such as Skype, Zoom, or other virtual and social media platforms for granted. In contrast, many older adults face significant barriers to accessing this technology. These may be due to prohibitive costs or limited understanding of technological interfaces: reliance on landlines, minute-based cell phone plans, lack of computers, unfamiliarity with smartphones or computers. Such barriers inhibit access to social support and also medical care through telehealth. While MNM has instituted biweekly food deliveries and check-in calls to help ease isolation, our community partner has noticed decreased energy when they do speak with clients. Though anecdotal, this

finding makes them worried about the very real threat of depression and anxiety infiltrating their community.

While the community that we have worked with suffers, we as medical students find ourselves in a unique position to advocate for those we have worked with. Medical students and physicians have always possessed a duty to advocate for the individuals in their community, however, these times are special. With COVID and an upcoming election, Walnut Hills is placed in a difficult situation. This community is at particular risk for contracting COVID with a greater risk of negative outcomes due to their varying socioeconomic circumstances. MNM's community members may face transportation or other challenges related to election day voting procedures. We are committed to treating this health crisis as a learning opportunity and taking our first steps forward as advocating professionals.

As medical students, we can help community members advocate for themselves by addressing the aforementioned voting challenges. Educating community members about online registration and absentee ballots would increase voter registration, however the seniors and the many who are of lower socioeconomic status in Walnut Hills meet barriers to accessing the internet. We have received feedback from our community partner that voter registration forms in medical offices could be a beneficial supplement to this problem. In addition, as students, we could collect and drop off registration forms to help circumvent barriers to transportation and internet access. Voting access in underrepresented areas has historically been an issue. Therefore, without intervention, the problem will only get worse this election year when just leaving the house poses a significant health risk.

As previously stated, COVID spread is a massive concern for the Walnut Hills community on election day. We can reduce COVID spread in Walnut Hills during the election by increasing community education on COVID and safe practices such as social distancing, wearing masks and regular hand washing. Additionally, we can increase community access to resources needed to combat COVID. MNM is one of many organizations that collect sanitizing items and other donations in Walnut Hills, therefore we hope to spread awareness and increase donations to these organizations as well in order to serve a broader community. Finally, we can set an example to the community and limit the spread of COVID ourselves by following social distancing and sanitary guidelines.

In the long-term, we can advocate for policies that promote public health and equal access to voting. We can do this by writing letters, making phone calls, attending meetings, joining organizations that support our causes and most importantly voting. In order to do this, we should stay educated and updated on issues affecting our community, our nation and our world. When opportunities arise to vote for legislation that supports our community, we will uphold our responsibility as citizens and vote based on our values.

In summary, we hope you have understood the difficult circumstances that residents, particularly the seniors of Walnut Hills, have faced during this arduous time. Furthermore, we want to highlight the efforts Mercy Neighborhood Ministries has made in supporting the wellbeing of this at-risk population and acknowledging their need for increased support. If this article has caught the eyes of Governor Mike DeWine and the Ohio Governor's Office, then we implore your careful consideration to take into account our community's narrative, as well as others', when drafting legislation and influencing policy. Though we *can* do much, greater support is needed to increase what we are *able* to do. Overall, we thank you for your time and hope that, together, we can make lasting change that benefits a population that needs our help.

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